

Council – 18 April 2011

Transport Progress Report of Councillor Ansell, Portfolio Holder

Services within my Transport Portfolio are vital to residents, commerce, shoppers, parents and employees throughout the borough. They are critical to the ability to travel around the borough in a way that is both safe and convenient including, of course, the ease with which motorists can park at their destination. We are responsible for over 500 miles of road serving a population of over 250,000 and it is therefore important that the council prioritises this service for the benefit of the whole community.

Transportation makes a vital contribution to the local economy and we are working closely with the newly formed Local Enterprise Partnerships, the new Integrated Transport Authority, and nearby Councils to promote regeneration and economic success.

We have worked with neighbouring authorities to help produce the third Local Transport Plan which was approved and submitted to the Department for Transport in March. This sets out a long term strategy for the road network for the next five years and aims to meet objectives relating to economic growth, regeneration, climate change, deprivation, worklessness and quality of life.

A major achievement for the council in recent months has been the Department for Transport's recent approval of the Expression of Interest for the £30m Darlaston Strategic Development Area scheme. A final bid will be submitted in September. I am optimistic that this will enable the regeneration of this site bringing with it thousands of much needed jobs for the area.

Completion of the new Bentley Road South canal bridge will also assist the Darlaston economy by removing the weight restriction on its use.

The ring road continues to attract major investment with the new WHG head office being the latest development to take place. This of course follows construction of the new College, improvements to the Manor Hospital, commencement of the Waterfont project and, most recently, the opening of the new Tesco superstore.

The formal consultation phase for the high speed rail link to London (HS2) commenced in February and, as you will be aware, this Council supports the proposal subject to consideration of the necessary business case. The challenge will be to ensure that Walsall gains from any improvements to the existing rail network that eventually take place.

The council played a vital role in ensuring that concerned residents living nearby had a full opportunity to air their views and secure important concessions from the Highways Agency in relation to its M6 active traffic management works between Junctions 8 and 10. This scheme is now in operation and it is anticipated that it will reduce the

problem of congestion, improve air quality in the area and reduce the impact on Walsall Town Centre when traffic from the motorway has to be diverted onto our road network.

Within the current economic climate, it is more important than ever to ensure that we deliver value for money. The past year has been a challenging time for all councils with reduced budgets and in-year savings required affecting all aspects of the service from new safety schemes to general road maintenance.

However, the reactive highways maintenance service has been the first to utilise Lean Systems Thinking and was successful, in conjunction with our partner Tarmac, in identifying more than £400,000 worth of efficiencies and savings with the introduction of improved methods of working. This has meant that, despite a reduction in budgets, we will be able to invest more in our road network for the benefit of road users throughout the borough. This is now being extended to cover the planned maintenance team as well and more efficiencies are anticipated.

We have benefited from a recent injection of £522,000 of additional funding as announced in the Government's March budget to help address the damage caused by the period of severe weather late last year. A further £150,000 has been added by the council demonstrating its commitment to maintaining a safe and efficient network of roads even during a period of financial restraint.

The winter service has again performed well working within our £300,000 budget and we are about to undertake a full review of this service. This is significantly less than the amount spent by other Black Country boroughs without any reduction in service whatsoever. Once again, this represents excellent value for money for Council Tax payers in Walsall.

Over the past year we have delivered a major £7.5m programme of highways maintenance schemes made up of a total of 170 schemes treating 260,000 square metres of road. In addition to this, we have delivered twelve other schemes at a cost of some £3m including road safety schemes such as improving the keyway junction on the Black Country Route and other larger projects such as the Bus Showcase and Red Routes programme. In particular, we have worked closely with Centro and public transport operators to make improvements along the A34 through Bloxwich and the A454 Wolverhampton Road to Junction 10 of the M6.

In our drive to reduce costs and waste and address ever increasing energy costs, the Council has approved expenditure of £250,000 to fund an innovative 'invest to save' scheme which will see us working with our Public Lighting PFI partners to modify some of our 26,000 street lights to reduce running costs and carbon tax liabilities.

During the year we have taken the opportunity to further develop shared services where, working with our Black Country neighbours, we have put in place a framework contract for the delivery of minor highway improvement schemes and contributed to the formation of the central urban traffic control centre for the West Midlands. We have also built on our relationship with Sandwell who now assist with structural and bridge approval procedures. Other opportunities to improve efficiencies are currently being assessed including civil parking enforcement.

Implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement, including the recent introduction of on-street parking charges, has benefited the community by helping to reduce congestion through better controls on car parking.

We have met with business representatives and are reviewing the approach to charging and location of car parks to ensure their better supply and use, again highlighting our commitment to supporting local businesses.

The Variable Message Signs on strategic routes into Walsall have all been completed and final testing is underway prior to them going live. This will support the town centre economy by helping visitors to park quickly and will help reduce congestion on the approach roads.

The government has published a Transport White Paper which emphasises the importance of managing traffic to reduce carbon emissions and tackle congestion. As part of this, we will be receiving a grant of £32,000 to deliver cycle training for children to address both safety and health initiatives. In addition, we have delivered several safety campaigns during the year including the For My Girlfriend campaign at Walsall College in February and a partnership event held at the Banks's Stadium targeting 150 young drivers over 3 days.

There are new duties and responsibilities on this Council relating to flood prevention and a Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment is being prepared in liaison with the Environment Agency ready to meet the deadline for submission in June 2011. This will lead to better coordination and understanding of the flooding risk in the borough. The council has recently been held up by the government as an example of good practice nationally for the work it has done on this important issue.

Ongoing investment in transport is critical to making Walsall a great place to live, work and play. We are committed to maintaining transport networks that support the growth and development of Walsall's economy whilst serving the needs of our local communities. Although this is a challenge in these times of unprecedented financial restraint, I am more than satisfied of our continuing ability to achieve our goal given the performance of my transportation services over the past year and the considerable progress that has been made.

Councillor T Ansell

**Cabinet Member
Transport**